



Olivia

Dorothy Strachey , Dorothy Bussy , Regina Marler (Foreword)

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“Considered one of the most subtle and beautifully written lesbian novels of the century, this 1949 classic returns to print in a Cleis Press edition. Dorothy Strachey’s classic Olivia captures the awakening passions of an English adolescent sent away for a year to a small finishing school outside Paris. The innocent but watchful Olivia develops an infatuation for her headmistress, Mlle. Julie, and through this screen of love observes the tense romance between Mlle. Julie and the other head of the school, Mlle. Cara, in its final months.

“Although not strictly autobiographical, Olivia draws on the author’s experiences at finishing schools run by the charismatic Mlle. Marie Souvestre, whose influence lived on through former students like Natalie Barney and Eleanor Roosevelt. Olivia was dedicated to the memory of Strachey’s friend Virginia Woolf and published to acclaim in 1949. Colette wrote the screenplay for the 1951 film adaptation of the novel. In 1999, Olivia was included on the Publishing Triangle’s widely publicized list of the 100 Best Gay and Lesbian Novels of the 20th Century.

“Dorothy Strachey (1865-1960) was the sister of the novelist Lytton Strachey and a prominent member of the Bloomsbury Group.....Olivia, originally published under a pseudonym, is her only novel.” -- Amazon.com

Olivia Details

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Author : Dorothy Strachey , Dorothy Bussy , Regina Marler (Foreword)

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From Reader Review Olivia for online ebook

Liralen says

I was desperately curious about this because *boarding school* and *lesbians* and *older book* makes for a pretty interesting combination. And interesting it is, but so terribly odd in some ways too. I don't think this sort of book would make it past a contemporary slush pile, to be honest. The setup drags on for quite some time, despite the book's short length, and there are numerous red herrings—I'd initially expected, for example, that Olivia's love interest would be Laura, but instead...instead we have something of a Boston marriage between teachers, and teachers embroiled in jealousy and schemes and...all sorts of things.

Now, jealousy and schemes and so on—those would still go over like gangbusters. But no, what makes this feel so specific to its time is the peculiar chaste crush Olivia develops on one of her teachers at finishing school. Olivia does not really know what the crush means; I don't think she really has any idea what she wants out of it other than to be close to the teacher. Another, more sophisticated girl might. It is not entirely clear, either, what Miss Julie wants, but it's so utterly clear—to everyone, perhaps, but Olivia—that Olivia is not going to get what she's looking for.

In a contemporary book, I'd probably be looking for quite a bit more—for more character development, especially of students; for more about Olivia post-schooling; for more action, even quiet action (not necessarily more relationship action between Olivia and Miss Julie, mind, because...consent...and not necessarily more relationship action in general). Still...the slow pacing and older feeling to the book seem absolutely right for what it is, and gosh, I have to start reading more 'literary' books, because the vocabulary here was a delight.

Nicolas Chinardet says

Although it may not always have been the case (particularly at the time of publication in 1949), this fairly explicit (for the time) story about the unrequited love of a teenage girl for her headmistress should now perhaps be confined to the YA section.

The style is elegant and refined but the overly bathetic nature of adolescent first love, with all its uncertainties and exaggerations, is captured with too much accuracy for the more mature reader to be able to fully relate to the characters.

Annabeth Leong says

When I bought this book I joked to my friend that books like this should come with a tragedy meter. "On a scale of 0-10, how likely are the lesbians to die at the end?" I was nervous that I'd be frustrated and wouldn't enjoy the book because of that tragic trope. However, I found myself drawn in by the writing style. I also really appreciated the sense of adolescent mystery that the book captured. The narrator, Olivia, hasn't really figured out what's going on with erotic connections—I don't think she quite knows what she is feeling, and I don't think she knows how to parse the behavior that goes on around her. This makes for a moving mystery story. I remember how it felt to not quite understand what was going on in myself and others. The novel is a fast, deceptively simple read, but there's a lot going on with the characters. I expect I'll be thinking about this for quite some time. And (**spoiler alert**) given how many of the characters read as lesbians to me, I

was pleasantly surprised to find that almost none of them died at the end.

Ana Rînceanu says

I'll do a proper review of this novel after I see the 1951 movie *Olivia*, but FYI: it's wonderful.

Suzanne Stroh says

In the pantheon of lesbian classics reigns *Olivia*, Strachey's gripping account of her own coming of age, which is actually a *roman à clef* about two progressive Belle Époque girls' schools founded by Marie Souvestre. Strachey attended both: Allenswood in England and, in France near the forest of Fontainebleau, Les Ruches. *Olivia* is set at Les Ruches.

It was, of course, a "beehive" of erotic activity. Top Student Eleanor Roosevelt plays a supporting role in a cast that includes Strachey's headmistress and later employer, Marie Souvestre, rivaling the narrator for the love of another teacher. Natalie and Laura Barney were also among Souvestre's notable boarders, and we learn in Barney's 1926 novel, *Les amants féminins ou la troisième*, that Natalie still kept a cottage nearby, thirty years later.

Les Ruches left a lifelong impression upon most of its students, and so does *Olivia*. Much is written between the lines, so go slowly and savor what is not being said as much as what is being written. In that respect it reminds me of the other reigning majesty in the pantheon, *A Legacy* by Sybille Bedford. Of the two, *Olivia* is much easier to read.

Alaina says

I cannot believe this work is not more well-known as an early book about the lesbian experience. Possibly autobiographical, it tells the story of a 16-year old girl's love for her teacher. A classic story, to be sure, but Bussy imbues such a passion and immediacy to her tale that it is my personal suspicion that the pain of her loss and her love never faded, even after 40+ years and a marriage. It is impossible to know. what is important is that this is a beautiful little book; an artless, guileless story about a girl's innocent - but forbidden- love.

Bandit says

This is a supposed classic of lesbian fiction. I had to check it out. Sometimes novels (or movies for that matter) are named classics due to their sheer quality, originality and epic grandness, sometimes it is due to their contents being revolutionary for its day or for pioneering a new territory or genre. With *Olivia* it might have been the latter. It is a well written story of a student's ardent and incredibly chaste crush on her schoolmistress. As characteristic of its time, the Victorian sensibilities of the era make this primarily the passion of the mind and not a happy one at that. The object of affections comes across as emotionally manipulative and cruel, the eponymous character is much too naïve and reserved and the entire novel is somewhat overwrought with sentimental ornamentations. It is entirely possible that it simply packs a lesser

punch that other gay and lesbian classics of its time because, although inspired by certain real facts, this is a work written by a heterosexual woman who has consistently denied that Olivia was based on her. No personal struggle has inspired this, it is merely a sort of tragic fantasy, a fine read with some lovely language usage, but far from a great one.

Paloma Etienne says

Fantastic and passionate. Mlle Julia is a force of nature

Sian Lile-Pastore says

I loved this - dreamy, breathy, school almost romance in Paris.

Jeana says

This book didn't do much for me. I didn't really get involved or care much about any of the characters. Not sure if I missed something...

Violet says

A second reading, audio-book version.

I think I've read this book translated into Polish, about twelve thousand years ago, but my memory could (totally is) be deceiving me.

The feelings remain the same - such a silly, silly story, but great prose. The writing is hauntingly beautiful, stunning.

As for audio book narrator - the majority of dialogue was narrated in thick French accent, and that's kinda plus, and also made me really connect with Gomez Addams

Amy says

Olivia: A Novel left me with a rather bitter aftertaste, with the melange of love, worship and servitude all rolled into one and served together, upon the pedestal wherein Olivia placed Mlle Julie. I was as ambivalent as Olivia with regard to the perplexing Mlle Julie, and her seemingly bipolar mood swings. However, I wasn't fond of Olivia either, with the extremity of her neediness, nevertheless, I could empathize with her and the depths to which her love went.

Iria says

Loved it.

Loederkoningin says

Review to come.

K & K buddy read. Just peachy!<3

Oriana says

Heard about this from a great *GQ* piece called "21 Books You Don't Have to Read," which dismisses canonical standards and offers replacements instead. Here's from the entry for this book:

I have never been able to fathom why The Catcher in the Rye is such a canonical novel. I read it because everyone else in school was reading it but thought it was totally silly. Now, looking back, I find that it is without any literary merit whatsoever. Why waste adolescents' time? Alternatively, I'd suggest Olivia, the story of a British teenage girl who is sent to a boarding school in France. It is short and written in a kind of levelheaded and deceptively straightforward style. Olivia eventually falls in love with her teacher Mademoiselle Julie T, who in turn, and without reciprocating that love out loud, is equally in love with Olivia. Julie never takes a wrong step, but there are signs for those who know how to read them. I've read Olivia many, many times, and bought it for many of my friends.
